Flexible migrants. Brazilian gold miners and their quest for human security in Surinam

de Theije, M.E.M.; Bal, E.W.

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Flexible Migrants: Brazilian Gold Miners and their Quest for Human Security in Surinam

Marjo de Theije and Ellen Bal[1]

Contemporary Surinam is characterised by an ethnically and culturally diverse population. This heterogeneity is essentially the result of a long history (or histories) of forced (including the mass import of slaves) and voluntary immigration. With the exception of a small number of Amerindian communities (e.g. Caribs and Arawaks), all contemporary citizens of Surinam are descendants of immigrants or migrants themselves. Surinam's history of nation building is one marked by processes of uprooting, departure, creolisation, emancipation, community formation and taking root; each community (and individual) with its own specific trajectory.

Based on a plantation economy since the seventeenth century – some argue that Surinam still is a plantation society (Bruijne 2001: 223) – Surinam has been linked to the outside world through its export of mineral and half-finished products (including sugar, bauxite, some timber and gold) and import of labour. Until the abolition of slavery, slaves from various parts of West Africa formed around 90 per cent of the population.[2] The end of slavery led to a large inflow of indentured workers from British India, and the Dutch East Indies. Together with the original, Amerindian, communities and the 'white' section of the population (who never constituted more than 4 per cent of the total population) composed of Dutch, Belgians, Germans, French, Scandinavians, Ashkenazi and Sephardic Jews, the Dutch colony developed into a highly diverse society. Recent, postcolonial immigrations from China, the Dominican Republic, Haiti, and particularly Brazil, have added to the heterogeneity of the country's population.

Surinamese citizens such as the Hindustanis (of British Indian origin), the Afro-Surinamese or Creoles (descendants of slaves),

Maroon communities (descendants of runaway slaves), and the Javanese and Chinese (offspring of indentured labourers from the Dutch East Indies) have long histories of colonial suppression and of becoming full-fledged citizens of Surinam. The historical trajectories of recent, postcolonial migrants, such as Haitians, Dominicans and Brazilians, are, for various reasons, very different. Whereas the 'old migrants' could not, or did not want to, maintain relations with the place of origin (see e.g. Bal and Sinha-Kerkhoff 2006, 2008), 'new migrants' have many options at their disposal to keep up the linkages with their hometowns, families and friends. These interconnections have an important transformative effect on the process of immigration and integration, on notions of belonging and community constructions, on the way migrants are perceived and received by others, etc. (see Vertovec 2003).

This chapter focuses on the largest category of recent migrants, the Brazilians. We purposely refer to them as a *category* (or network) rather than a community, to emphasise the relatively feeble and instrumental character of the ties they maintain with one another (cf. Eriksen 2002: 41). Since the mid 1990s, tens of thousands of Brazilians have found their way to Surinam in search of work, gold and money. It is estimated that at this moment as many as 20,000 Brazilians are working and living in the country (Algemeen Bureau voor de Statistiek 2006: 439).[3] Our research shows that these immigrants are mostly unschooled or (semi)-literate agricultural labourers from the poorer regions in northern Brazil. They work in small-scale gold mining[4] as miners or *garimpeiros*,[5] in the *barrancos* (mining pits) owned by fellow Brazilians or Surinamese, who have invested in the necessary machinery. While the first *garimpeiros* generally stayed in the rainforest, since the mid 1990s, we find an increasing number in Paramaribo, the capital of Surinam. Local supermarkets have begun to sell Brazilian products, and Brazilians themselves have opened bars, hostels, and shops selling mining equipment for the *garimpeiros*. Nowadays, a part of the Tourtonne neighbourhood is known as Klein (Little) Belem, or Belemzinho, referring to Belem, the capital of the state of Pará, in the north of Brazil. Here, a visitor can imagine her- or himself in Brazil, with the signboards in Portuguese, and Brazilian products sold everywhere.

In Surinamese public discourse, the Brazilians are considered a threat to Surinam's security (economy, ecology, society, etc.) rather than an asset. Newspapers report that the Brazilians are there 'to carry away our gold';[6] they describe them as aliens who do not pay tax and who import criminality from Brazil. Time and again,

'illegal' and 'Brazilian' seem inextricably bound up with one another. Indeed, most *garimpeiros* have no residence or working permit (at the most a temporary tourist visa), no social security number, no health insurance, no permanent address and no guaranteed income. While representing a threat to human security for many Surinamese, the *garimpeiros* themselves live and work under harsh conditions, and face various insecurities on a daily basis. Their illegal status and the absence of a strong sense of community render them physically and existentially vulnerable. They have to deal with (political) marginalisation, health risks, loneliness, isolation, anxiety, etc.

It is tempting for anthropologists, who often study the poor rather than the rich, the weak rather than the powerful, to concentrate on the downsides of illegal migration: the push factors (poverty, deprivation, etc.) that led to the migration and/or the marginal and vulnerable position of illegal immigrants. In this chapter, we adopt an alternative approach that focuses in particular on the flipside of individualism (read solitude) and detachment, and which we sum up with the term *migrant flexibility*. We will show that the absence of a close-knit community, the lack of attachment to Surinam (as a nation, and place) and their position as (frequently) illegal or semi-illegal, also allows for individual freedom and opens up various new possibilities. All miners, Brazilian and Surinamese alike, share an interest in some basic facilities, stability and trust in the field, in order to realise their individual dreams of prosperity (Heemskerk and de Theije forthcoming, Theije 2007a, 2007b). Yet their relative lack of commitment (to one another and to Surinam, its people, soil and even its gold), makes it much easier for the Brazilian miners to 'move on', to find other professions, and to try their luck elsewhere. In other words, while there are many downsides of illegal work in gold mining, their position as aliens implies a certain individualism and detachment that facilitate a readiness to take risks, i.e. to undertake actions that carry some probability for negative consequences (e.g. Boyer in Magar et al. 2008: 10), and an ability to move on, and to create new chances.

The concept of *human security* offers an interesting tool, or lens, to study these Brazilians in their quest for human security (or rather, in their search for gold). It provides a particularly suitable instrument to unravel the many faces and dynamics of migration and belonging, encompassing individual differences and collective similarities at the same time. It helps to uncover (apparently) contradictory manifestations of human (in)security that accompany migration processes in general, and, more specifically, the migration processes of Brazilian

gold miners in Surinam. Here we argue that the conditions (such as the lack of a strong collective and binding identity, individualism, illegality), which often mark the lives of these migrants, not only cause physical and existential insecurity, but also facilitate a certain *physical* and *mental* flexibility, that may open up new opportunities.

Hereafter, we will try to demonstrate the complexity of human security in the lives of the Brazilian miners in Surinam by giving a brief description of the various insecurities these miners have to face, followed by an account of the flipsides of many of these same insecurities, which also open up new possibilities for these migrants. We have woven the life story of Helena, a 52-year-old Brazilian female *garimpeiro* through our account. Her life history is particularly revealing of the paradoxes of human security for Brazilian gold miners in Surinam.

MIGRATION TO SURINAM AS A STRATEGY IN THE QUEST FOR HUMAN SECURITY

Most Brazilians in Surinam exchanged a situation of relative certainty (in terms of predictability and familiarity with their life conditions) for a life in an unknown country, where they will have no secure income, where living conditions will be harsh, and where they will be in a vulnerable position in terms of civil rights. However, many *garimpeiros* in Surinam were already experienced (seasonal) migrants before they moved on to Surinam, British Guyana or French Guiana. Many had migrated from rural zones to mining areas, or from southern or north-eastern states to the north, Pará in particular. For gold miners in Brazil, mining often is a seasonal activity (Slater 1994: 720). In southern Pará, for example, rural workers incorporate mining in the 'cyclical logic' of their work (Schonenberg 2001: 399).[7] Most informants estimate that 90 per cent of the Brazilians in Surinam come from northern Brazil, and that some 70 per cent of them are from rural Maranhão. Every day new migrants arrive, while others return temporarily or to never come back again.

From the 1980s onward, gold mining became the most important motive for migration in northern Brazil. In 1980, the discovery of a large gold mine in Serra Pelada (Bald Mountain), in the Brazilian Amazon, triggered a gold rush involving 80,000 *garimpeiros* and ultimately producing 90,000 kilos of gold from a single open pit (Veiga 1997: 10). From here, gold fever spread to neighbouring countries such as Venezuela, Guyana, French Guiana and Surinam,

and caused a revival of small-scale gold mining in these countries. The rise in the price of gold since the 1970s, the deterioration of the local economy, the civil war in the 1980s,[8] and the closing of many mining sites in the Brazilian Amazon for independent *garimpeiros* ultimately led to the influx of thousands of Brazilian miners into Surinam. Between 1995 and 1998, gold production in Surinam boomed. The estimated output rose from 10,000 kilos in 1995 to 20,000 in 1998 and 1999, but only part of the production was registered (Mol et al. 2001: 184). This corresponds with the observations of our interviewees, who identified 1997–8 as the peak year for immigration of Brazilians into Surinam. Since then, the production of gold in small-scale mining continued to increase and the official Central Bank of Suriname's purchases from *garimpeiros* and *porknockers* almost doubled to 12,000 kilos between 2000 and 2006. Gold is Surinam's second largest export product (after alumina) and more than half of it is produced by small-scale mining (International Monetary Fund 2007).

The 'business' of small-scale mining is by definition a risky one, and the life of a *garimpeiro* is harsh and unpredictable in various ways. A miner is never certain of his income, and investments may or may not render any profits. Mining in Surinam is usually carried out by a small workforce of four to eight miners, one (female) cook, and an overseer (who may also be the owner), who organises the work. *Garimpeiros* work for a specified share of the production, while cooks, drivers of tractors and all terrain vehicles (ATVs), and operators of excavating machines have fixed wages. All informants agreed that it was becoming increasingly difficult to find gold; in the words of Pedro: 'Easy gold, at the door of your house, near to the city, easy to win ... is finishing.' To find gold now requires far greater investments in terms of time, labour and machinery. For small-scale *garimpeiros* this is far more difficult than for the large companies, who are granted concessions in the Surinamese rainforest, because their methods are based on experience and trial and error, instead of scientific research. If no gold is found, the investments are gone.

Another important risk factor concerns the health of the *garimpeiros* and of all others living in gold miner camps. Good sanitation is often lacking, there is a shortage of clean water, and the diet is poor – even though all *garimpeiros* emphasised that it is very important to eat well if one has to work so hard. The job itself is heavy and unhealthy; the men stand in the water under the burning sun, up to 12 hours a day. All informants who had been asked about it stated that they suffered from malaria. Moreover, in order to separate the gold from the soil, miners use mercury, which is known for its harmful effects on health and the environment. Pit workers also suffer disproportionately from accidents with the machines used in mining (Heemskerk 2003: 275).

An additional factor contributing to the insecurity of Brazilian miners is their, often illegal or semi-illegal position. *Garimpeiros* repeatedly complain about the Surinamese bureaucracy causing this problem by not granting them a work permit. This sense of 'deportability' or 'the possibility of deportation' (Degenova 2002: 439) causes anxiety. As citizens without rights, they feel at risk from criminals and corrupt police. Rumours about the police raiding *pensións* and brothels to check documents and to arrest illegal Brazilians abound. Sometimes the illegal worker can pay his or her way out of trouble, but they may also be deported. Some informants argued that it is not impossible to acquire a legal status, even though Surinamese bureaucracy is difficult to tackle.

One important aspect of human security is that of 'belonging'. Here we focus on three particular dimensions of belonging that play a crucial role in the lives of the *garimpeiros* in Surinam: belonging to Surinam as a (nation-)state, to land (as 'sons' and rightful owners, 'of the soil'), and to a local (regional, religious, ethnic, etc.) community. The *garimpeiros* have not developed a strong sense of belonging on any of these three dimensions. Earlier we detailed how their often illegal status causes a sense of insecurity and vulnerability. As illegal immigrants, moreover, they have no legal rights as citizens of Surinam, and can make no claims concerning the mine pit in which they work, no matter the amount of blood, sweat and tears they invest in that soil. Traditional owners of the land or concession holders may suddenly expel these workers from a mining pit.

Yet, there is, as we shall demonstrate hereafter, another interesting side to this: while Surinamese miners, whether they are locals or from other parts of the country, are permanently fearful that the gold will become exhausted, the *garimpeiros* do not share that fear. Once the gold runs out, they will simply move on, unattached as they are to the place. The third dimension of belonging, that of belonging to a community, which provides a sense of identity, a we-feeling, a warm nest that offers support in times of need (cf. Bauman 2001), has not strongly developed amongst the miners. Certainly, a *garimpeiro* network has developed, and the Brazilians know where to find support, advice, comfort, leisure, etc. Nonetheless, many have explained that, when it comes down to it, they are on their own.

FLEXIBLE MIGRANTS: MOVEABLE AND NON-MOVEABLE SECURITIES

'It was well worth the pain.' After working for twelve years in Surinam, the 52-year-old Helena is about to return to Brazil. Satisfied, she looks back on a very successful period in her life. She left Brazil because she did not see any opportunities to improve her economic situation there. 'I have no schooling, so in Brazil I would be a laundress or domestic servant. In Brazil, I would not have earned even 10 per cent of what I earned here.'[9]

Helena was born in Tocantins, in northern Brazil. Already at a young age, in the 1970s, she became involved in the service economy, which the gold mining in this region had generated. Later she moved on to Brasilia, where she married and had two children. When her husband died and left her with two small children, she decided to return to the north to make a living there. In 1981, the gold rush in the Amazon region reached a climax, caused by the discovery of gold in Serra Pelada. Helena then decided to shift to Santarem, where she began a shop for miners and others who swarmed into the region. Ten years later, the mining business in Santarem deteriorated. In 1995, Helena decided to leave her country and to take a chance elsewhere. She accepted the invitation of a friend who had moved to Surinam and decided to try her luck in Paramaribo, Surinam. She opened a restaurant, at a time when many Brazilians were arriving. Some years later, she moved on to the mining area known as Benzdorp, where she started a shop and a restaurant. Benzdorp was growing fast in those years, and her business prospered. After a few years, she sold her house and restaurant, and set up her own gold mining business. She bought a motor and other mining necessities, and became a pit owner.

In many respects, Helena's case is unique and different from other stories. Unlike most *garimpeiros*, for example, she is a woman. And while many *garimpeiros* never had any other professions but gold mining, Helena also was a shop owner, a cook, etc. At the same time, however, her fate is similar to that of other Brazilians, and her life story contains many elements that are crucial to our understanding of the temporary migration of the thousands of *garimpeiros* to Surinam and Guyana and French Guiana.

RAGS AND RICHES

For the various reasons mentioned above, the business of gold mining is risky. At the same time, however, it holds the promise of fortune.

There is always that chance to strike lucky. Since *garimpeiros* work for a set percentage of the produce – this applies to the pit owners as much as to the miners – this chance, or dream, seems to outweigh the risks. The percentage the workers receive depends on the working techniques used (with the exception of the concession owner, who always receives 10 per cent of the total produce). In a pit where all work is carried out manually, the labourers divide 30 per cent of the remaining produce among themselves (in case of six workers, for example, each worker receives 5 per cent). The remaining 70 per cent is for the owner to pay all the operation costs, including the salary of the cook and food for the whole crew. In pits where the service is (partly) mechanised with excavator machines and sometimes bulldozers, the percentage for the workers drops (down to 12 per cent) but more terrain is processed and output thereby increased. In any case, the higher the production, the more gold the workers receive.

Yet not all Brazilian migrants are directly involved in the mining business and these migrants do not earn a fixed share of the turnover. However, the industry attracts all sorts of entrepreneurs, who seize the opportunity to benefit from the business (if only the attraction) of gold. A worksite, or *barranco* (literally gully, artisanal mining pit), is often located at a great distance from a village. Hence, the workers live in camps, sometimes with workers from nearby *barrancos*. In this way, the gold industry generates many auxiliary economic opportunities, such as the trade in Brazilian products (ranging from clothes to cigarettes to perfumes), jobs as cook for the work teams in the gold fields, and prostitution. All these activities have in common that they can easily be practised somewhere else.

Helena narrated her life story as if her success as a mine owner was entirely coincidental. However, she had worked hard and lived sober, which allowed her to save a part of her earnings. And when she wanted to invest her savings, she did not open yet another restaurant or shop, nor did she import goods from Brazil to sell in the mining camps. Instead, she bought the necessary equipment and began digging for gold herself. After one unsuccessful attempt, with gear she had partially bought on tick, she hit a good spot, rich in gold. This was 'where everything started, and where I bought another machine, my ATV, excavator – the first one – the Caterpillar'. For Helena, her switch to the gold mining was the best thing she has ever done. It is interesting to note that she does not describe her venture as particularly risky, although she took many chances and encountered various problems in the years that followed. Although

she was grateful to God, who 'was always blessing me (...) when things got really difficult', she also explained that '*garimpo* is good business, because you can start with something small', and that it may provide 'good money so that you can grow.'[10] In short, gold mining is risky and attractive at the same time. It involves many hazards but also holds the promise of becoming very successful one day. In addition, it provides the possibility to earn money in various ways, not only by means of the gold digging itself. It requires flexible, resourceful, hardworking individuals, who are ready to take risks, to respond to new opportunities, and to move on when business declines.

ADVENTURE

Gold miners expect to prosper one day. This is an important motive for the Brazilians to engage in gold mining. However, the expectations of economic affluence may simply connote a modest desire to become financially self-sufficient, to be able to buy one's own clothes, to become independent of parental support. Many *garimpeiros* entered the profession as young boys and they related how difficult it was to get used to the circumstances in the *garimpo*. Yet, in retrospect, they also point out that they got used to it, even ended up liking this kind of life. Some expressed this by saying that the *garimpo* is a vice to which they have become addicted. In other words, risk-taking has become more than a strategy; it has become a lifestyle (Nooteboom 2003: 223).

Working in the *garimpo* is an exciting activity and definitely less boring than working on the land, which is not only tedious, but also offers few perspectives on a better life. In the words of Leonardo: 'What counts is the hope, the expectation that you can achieve the goal you have. Adventure dominates. Working on the land, as a labourer, you will never achieve what you want.' As a *garimpeiro* you have more chances: 'Sometimes you are lucky, quickly, in four to five months, maybe a year, you accomplish what you want.... That is why we opt for this adventure.' Leonardo, now in his early forties, had followed his older brothers to work as a *garimpeiro* when he was a young man, back in Pará, in the 1980s.[11]

The women who join as cooks or sex workers, or who take up jobs in the commercial trade, make similar calculations. Some female informants framed their motives in a discourse of need back home, but others also underscored their desire to try something different; they explained that they saw no future back home, while working

for minimal wages, without a husband to provide for them and their children, for example. Once in the *garimpo*, some discovered that the adventure was not quite as pleasant as they had imagined it, and that the work was not as easy as they had expected. They began repenting their choice and could only think of earning enough gold to return as soon as possible. However, for young women, an additional aspect of their migrant life is the opportunity to meet a man from another background, with financial means, who may become their husband. Many (ex-) sex workers dream of marrying a Dutchman, although most of them hardly know any Dutch people in Surinam. In general, women in the *garimpo* communities do not stay single for a long time.

The adventure of the *garimpo* is expressed through stories of success and failure that are told and retold again and again; anecdotes about the kilos of gold found and again lost due to bad management, or about the kilos dug up while working for others and for which they never received their rightful shares. Many migrants never find the anticipated riches, and have to work hard to make ends meet with their mining activities. Brazilians from the first hour, in the Benzdorp/Antino area, recount romantic stories about their contribution to the infrastructure in the gold field, about how they spent weeks constructing paths into the bush, making shortcuts to the creeks further inland; men with simple tools and a lot of courage. This courage they still need. Zito and his wife live in a camp four hours inland, and with their old pick-up car have to pass through a dangerous, mountainous area to get there. 'I have lost three babies there already,' Zito said, referring to the accidents and near-accidents they had had, to explain the miscarriages his wife suffered in the past years.[12] They are still longing for a child but their risky and adventurous life does not seem to allow for a fulfilment of this dream.

For a number of *garimpeiros*, the decision to go after gold, even as far as the goldfields in Surinam, seems motivated by the desire to be free, to travel, to escape, more so than by the aspiration to strike it rich one day. Many of the life stories show that the miners decided to join the gold mining business at times in their lives when many things went wrong; when they faced bad luck in business, ended a relationship, were in discord with their parents, etc. Gold seemed to offer a way out of these troubled lives.

Apart from the adventurous life and the dreams of riches, several other attractions keep the Brazilians in the *garimpo*. Social life in the bush is full of temptations, such as drink, drugs and sex. The

pit owners who strike it rich share their fortune with others in the brothels of the *garimpo*, and the workers who are less prosperous spend their earnings and hang around near luckier ones to get drinks and women. Quite a number of Brazilians get hooked on these temptations of the *garimpo* life. 'Even when you had not planned to go to the *currutela* [brothel],' says Vander from Maranhão, 'a colleague comes along and invites you, and then another passes by, and you end up spending a gram of gold as if it is a *Real*.'[13] 'You end up losing a lot, spending all you earned during one or several months of hard work in the *barranco*,' he concludes.

In all life histories, independence stands out as a significant characteristic of the *garimpeiro* life in Surinam. A pit owner is free to move to another region, whenever he expects to find more gold there. The worker can leave the pit owner when he does not like the management, his co-workers, the food, or when he finds that the *currutela* is located too far away, or for whatever reasons that frustrate him. In the *garimpo*, a kind of sociability is created, in which courage, risk, luck and conspicuous consumption are central elements. In this social environment, a once landless peasant from Brazil may now be an independent, successful miner, his own boss. Although once the objective of migration was to earn money, *garimpo* life is highly appealing, even addictive, and keeps many workers involved in the *garimpeiro* business in Surinam.

HOME AWAY FROM HOME

'We Brazilians are like compulsory tourists,' said Chico. 'We create our home away from home, wherever we go.'[14] With these words, he explains the growth of the mining village Benzdorp, with its Brazilian bars, Brazilian products put up for sale and Brazilian atmosphere. He also points to the adaptable nature of the population of Surinam's gold fields, and to the (intended) temporariness of their presence in the country. Tourists are merely visitors, they may settle for a while but they do not root. Chico's comparison provides some key explanations for the absence of a strong sense of belonging to Surinam.

The Brazilian migrants see many opportunities to earn money in Surinam but they do not intend to settle in the country on a permanent basis. Most of them express the desire to return to Brazil one day, to set up house near their families, and to resume their lives over there. They will use their savings to build a house, to begin a shop, restaurant or something else that should guarantee a

decent income. Helena was earning a lot of money for quite some years, but wanted more, 'because it would not have been worth the pain, if I merely returned to the life I used to live before Surinam. I want to go back to a different life.' Hence she stayed several years longer, in order to return as a rich woman. Many migrants, however, never achieve this goal and quite a number end up being 'stuck' in Surinam. Nevertheless, even these men and women continue trying to materialise their dream to return to Brazil one day and to start a business there.

Brazilian migrants invest much more in their links with Brazil than in personal relations in Surinam. Most workers maintain their emotional ties to Brazil, facilitated by ever improving telecommunication facilities in both countries. Those who can afford it, return for some months every one, two or three years, to visit their families. Many then have a medical check-up, and, if they have enough savings, make some investments. Those with rural backgrounds buy some livestock to start a cattle farm. Others purchase a motorcycle to begin a taxi service. The ones who used to live in towns and cities generally purchase a plot for the construction of a house.

Workers and work sites in Surinam are of a temporary nature. People are constantly on the move. Work places are deserted after some months of work, when the gold is finishing, and camps are thus frequently relocated. Often, machine owners find new locations nearby, but when they do not, they may move their camps to far-away gold fields, in Surinam itself or in neighbouring French Guiana. Now and then, camps become more permanent, when machine owners construct proper houses for themselves and only move workers and camps to new gold fields. For individual workers the shifting between locations is relatively easy since they generally have very few belongings in Surinam and do not need to bring much equipment to the next workplace. These men and women travel light, with one or two bags only, adapted to the temporary nature of their migrant lives.

As urban Paramaribo is difficult to reach from many of the gold fields – only by expensive air connections or by strenuous boat trips – most *garimpeiros* only go there to board their flights to Brazil. Pit owners and shopkeepers in the *garimpo* make the trip more frequently, to purchase mining equipment, mercury, fuel, radio-telephone stations and food supplies for their crew, for prices far cheaper than in the *garimpo*. They also visit the capital to sell their gold, to recover from malaria, to take some rest and to find *divertimento*. Many however have an 'agent' – mostly Surinamese

men who speak Portuguese – who does the shopping for them and who sends the purchases to the *garimpo*. In other words, for most Brazilians in *garimpo* areas in Surinam, the jungle is their most permanent abode.

In this situation of constant shift, a need for some sort of community or 'familiar (read: Brazilian) company' arises. Wherever the migrants go, they create home away from home. In this context, home may simply refer to a shelter, where they can hang their hammocks and secure their scant belongings. Yet in villages such as Benzdorp at the Lawa River, or those around the Brokopondo Lake, 'home' also includes shops, hairdressers, bars, *cabarés* (brothels), one or two Brazilian Pentecostal churches, some basic medical assistance (in the form of Brazilian medicine), Brazilian music, a satellite TV connection with Brazil. Hence, these villages offer a feel of home: Brazil in a nutshell. Surinamese dwellers in such places form a minority. They have adapted to the Brazilian environment, speak Portuguese, dance to Brazilian music and drink Brazilian beer.[15]

NO RIGHTS, NO TIES

The (transnational) focus on Brazil alone does not explain why Brazilians remain indifferent to Surinam and the Surinamese. Several other factors fuel their lack of engagement. An obvious one is the fact that few workers are in the possession of an official permit. Many enter Surinam by crossing the Maroni River, which separates Surinam from French Guiana. Here, border authorities are entirely absent. Those *garimpeiros* who obtained a visa upon arrival at Johan Adolf Pengel international airport, or in one of the border towns, do not bother to have it renewed in Paramaribo. According to the representative of the Brazilian consulate in Paramaribo: 'They have enough other problems to deal with and no time to worry about their legal rights and documents.' To be undocumented renders the Brazilians vulnerable. When they are victims of crime, for example, or become involved in a conflict with the Maroons, they cannot call in the police. However, the Brazilians also know that they are never asked for these documents, and in the *garimpo* such documents are of no use at all. Here, other rights matter, such as customary rights to the land (held by the Maroons), or the regulations drawn up by the concession owners.

Land claims by local Maroon and indigenous populations are most troublesome for the Brazilians. Not because *garimpeiros* are against such rights, but because claimants are unpredictable and

one can never be sure who may rightfully make a claim. In most gold fields, local chiefs (*gaaman* or *kabiten*)[16] grant permission to Brazilians to carry out their mining activities in exchange for a regular payment of gold, or for a specified percentage of the production (usually 10 per cent). However, sometimes other claimants appear, and the Brazilians end up making payments to several persons. It may also happen that a local person shows up to order the *garimpeiros* to leave the pit, causing the Brazilians to lose their investments. This also happened to Helena once. Even though she knew that the claimant had no legal basis for taking her place, she – in retrospect – said rather acceptingly: 'he may not have been the owner, but he was from this land, from this soil.... And, as the Surinamese say: "You [Brazilians] did not bring even a handful of soil from Brazil."'

The position of concession holder seems much clearer to the migrants, partly because some of them have introduced a registration system and employ staff who not only collect the produce, but also maintain peace and order. However, concessionaires may suddenly change their rules, and evict workers or demand bigger payments, etc. This also happened on the Antino property. In 2006, the owner of the concession entered an agreement with Reunion Gold, a Canadian gold company, to carry out systematic explorations of the field. Several Brazilians had to quit their mining activities on those locations where professional geologists anticipated significant gold reserves. In other words, Brazilians are never sure how long they will be able to stay on a certain site. This, in combination with their orientation towards Brazil and their often illegal position in the country, means that the *garimpeiros* do not become involved with Surinam, its nation and its soil.

This does not mean that the Brazilians make no efforts to legalise their positions at all, however. When, by the end of 2007, the Surinamese government ran a 'pre-registration' campaign, Brazilians cooperated in large numbers. Furthermore, in the Benzdorp/Antino area, where mining takes place on the concessions of two city-based companies, the Brazilians considered registration with one of these firms as a legal permission to work there. Every owner of a pit, shop or bar in the settlement carefully guarded the receipts of his or her monthly payment to the permit holder. To them, such receipts proved that they paid tax, even though this probably would not be of much help if the immigration and tax authorities brought a case against them. Yet, owing to the overall lack of state control – or 'government void' (Kruijt and Hoogbergen 2005: 200) – it is

relatively easy to live and work in Surinam for many years without ever getting into administrative trouble.

Helena had all her paperwork in order and she paid her annual income tax. She could have easily refrained from doing so, however, because 'nobody ever asked me for my documents'.

SKILLS

Even though the first Brazilians did not have at their disposal the infrastructure that was available ten years later, they encountered an environment that was very similar to what they were used to back home. Brazil is 'Amazonian' as well and, hardly hindered by state borders, the Brazilians can quite easily move between countries (Heemskerk and Theije forthcoming). Take the case of Chico, for example, who began working as a *garimpeiro* in Rondônia, Guajará-mirim, moved on to Rondônia, Boa Vista ('I picked up some gold there'), and from there to French Guiana, where he worked for several companies in Cayenne. After his deportation from that country for the fifth time, he crossed the river into Surinam.[17]

Once in Surinam, many Brazilians continue to move around, from workplace to workplace. They travel in the jungle for hours, days, or even weeks, to search for a good place to work. Although they depend on the gold for their subsistence, for the reasons discussed earlier, they do not become attached to the ground, the place, the soil where the gold lies hidden. Instead, they keep moving and, wherever they go, they take their skills and work ethos with them. In fact, their very success in small-scale gold mining in Surinam is contingent on their knowledge and experience with different techniques. They introduced the hydraulic methods of mining, which nowadays prevail in the small-scale mining business in Surinam. They brought their equipment to the region and shared their technical knowledge with the local population. Even those Maroons who were not directly involved in the mining business also profited from the economic activities of these *garimpeiros*. The Brazilians have given a boost to the local economy and they pay informal taxes to the local authorities. They are generally more productive than other workers, and concessionaires favour them over others, both as investors and as workers. Their success has also brought some basic economic security for themselves, and at least a relative command over their own lives. Their skills and knowledge are their principal assets. Wherever they go, they will always have those, adding to their flexibility and readiness to move.

CONCLUDING REMARKS: 'THE DESTINY OF AN ADVENTURER IS TO WALK'

'The destiny of an adventurer is to walk.' This is how Helena described her fate and that of her fellow *garimpeiros* during her last conversation with Marjo, while she was waiting for the buyer of her excavator to hand over the gold. After this, she would return to Brazil. Together, they were contemplating Helena's plans, of staying put somewhere in Brazil for three months or so, and of next moving on to set up a new business in Brazil or somewhere outside the country. Helena was sure of one thing: she would not return to Benzdorp, where the gold reserves are coming to an end. Other places in Surinam, so she had heard, are offering a similar prospect. She would probably continue her 'walk' and head for Guyana, or Venezuela, or maybe to one of these new *garimpos* in Brazil.

In this chapter, we showed how the various insecurities, uncertainties and risks, which lie at the core of the lives of Brazilian gold miners in Surinam, also allow for a certain flexibility of minds and hearts, and mobility of bodies, enhancing their chances and even certain pleasures in life. By applying human security as a tool, or lens, to study this particular type of migration, we tried to show how the different dimensions of human security and insecurity are interconnected: how they may cause pain and pleasure, anxiety and fortune, loneliness and freedom, at the same time. We also pointed out that risk-taking should not (only) be conceptualised as the negative side of human security, as the opposite of the security which people desire, but also as a road to security (gold), or even as a desire in itself (a continuous craving for the adventurous life of a *garimpeiro*). In this sense, risk-taking gives expression to individual ambitions, dreams, and the ability and readiness to create new chances in life.

The circumstances under which the Brazilian *garimpeiros* in Surinam live and work are harsh, and encompass serious health hazards and various uncertainties, including that of being without a proper legal position. Notwithstanding these downsides to their lives, our informants showed great appreciation of the economic opportunities, adventure and autonomy, which come with their migrant lives. *Garimpeiros* have, in fact, become quite attached, even addicted to both their individual and shared lifestyles. To many *garimpeiros*, the positive dimensions of risk seem to outweigh the negative dimensions of insecurity and, for some, risk-taking has even become a lifestyle. Illegality, individualism and uprootedness have resulted in a certain physical and mental flexibility that opens up

new opportunities. This renders them less dependent on Surinam and the Surinamese, and probably less vulnerable to exploitation than previous immigrants to the country were, in times when transnational connections could not be maintained. We by no means suggest that all migrations follow a similar kind of logic. We want to argue that those insecurities that characterise the lives of migrants, provide chance and agency at the same time. Contemporary gold mining (and the necessary migration) offers highly individualised strategies to get something more out of life. Only by means of close scrutiny of specific migration trajectories can we uncover these particular dimensions of human securities and insecurities, and their intricate interrelations.

The Brazilians prove to be flexible workers, possessed of a flexible mindset and of working skills and technical knowledge which are useful in many places. Based on these insights into their lives and minds, we predict that these migrants will move on, to risky places, opening up various new opportunities to improve their individual lives.

NOTES

1. This chapter is co-authored by Ellen Bal and Marjo de Theije, and based on fieldwork in Surinam since 2001. From 2001 to 2005, Ellen Bal conducted research on Surinamese and Dutch Hindustanis and their linkages with India. She worked closely together with Kathinka Sinha-Kerkhoff. Marjo de Theije began her research on Brazilians in Surinam in 2004. She has paid several research visits to Paramaribo and mining areas in Surinam, and has worked in total for eight months in one of the largest mining areas of the country. She collected the empirical data on which this chapter is based. Both authors work at the Department of Social and Cultural Anthropology of Vrije Universiteit/ Free University Amsterdam.
2. One-third, the Loangas, came from the area between Cameroon and Angola. One-third (Kromanti) came from the Gold Coast (Ghana). Some 25 per cent came from present-day Guinea, Sierra Leone, Liberia and Ivory Coast, and the rest came from Togo, Benin, Western Nigeria (Hoefte 2001: 7).
3. Neighbouring French Guiana and Guyana witnessed a similar influx of Brazilian migrants (Arouck 2000, Cleaver 2005, Colchester 1997, Herman 2003, Simonian and Ferreira 2006).
4. 'Small-scale gold mining' means all mining that uses rudimentary processes to extract gold from secondary and primary ore bodies (Heemskerk 2002: 327).
5. *Garimpeiro* is the Brazilian word for miner and is used almost exclusively for gold miner. In this chapter we use the word only for the Brazilians, not for other gold miners. In Sranan tongo (Surinamese language) gold miners are called *gowtuman*.
6. It suffices to look at forum pages of Surinamese newspapers to see this opinion expressed. See e.g. http://www.waterkant.net/suriname/2007/09/17/brazilianen-in-suriname/

7. This was also reported by Macmillan (1995: 73), who shows that miners are not necessarily landless peasants, as is often thought, and that for many small landowners mining offers an additional source of income (see also Menezes 2004).
8. In 1986, Maroons revolted against the military government, and a peace treaty between the Jungle Commando and the government was signed only in 1992. The 'inland war' caused a severe disruption of the social and economic life of the Maroons and a dislocation of 10,000 Surinamese to French Guiana, across the Maroni River, where many of them still live. The Jungle Commando relied on gold mining for their survival in the interior, and it was during this period that the first Brazilians were invited to work on dredges (*ponton*, *balsa*) in the Maroni River.
9. Over the course of 18 months, de Theije conducted four taped interviews with Helena (born in Tocantins, in 1953), the first in February 2006, the last on 1 July 2007, all in the mining camps where she was living at the time of the interview. Apart from these interviews there were many conversations during encounters at Helena's camp, the landing strip and in the miners' village nearby.
10. She continued: 'That is why I say that he also puts the gold, you know. Because he is the owner of the gold, the silver, he can do all things, he is the God that transformed water in wine ....' For an analysis of the relation between religious beliefs and gold mining, see de Theije (2008a, 2008b).
11. Interview 12 February 2006. Leonardo visited his brother who works on the Antino camp, a few hours walk from the place where he himself was working at the time.
12. Zito, born 1960, Tocantins; in Surinam since 1993; interview 25 May 2007.
13. *Real* is the Brazilian monetary unit. At the time of the interview a *Real* was worth €0.37. Vander, born 1975, Maranhão; in Surinam since 2003; interview 19 May 2007.
14. Chico, Benzdorp, 22 July 2006. Chico came to Benzdorp in 1995 and never left again.
15. For the Brazilians living in Paramaribo on a more permanent basis, Klein Belem is the area where they spend most of their time, not least because many work in the shops, restaurants and bars (including night clubs and brothels) that furnish services to the Brazilian community. But also because they rarely socialise with the Surinamese, since, as they themselves explain, they do not speak the local languages sufficiently well.
16. A *gaaman* (or *granman*) is the paramount chief of an indigenous or maroon tribe; a *kabiten* is a village headman of a tribal village.
17. Chico, Benzdorp, 22 July 2006.

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